

Haim Steinbach

REPORTS ON THE ORIGINS OF SHOPPING extend all the way back to Babylon. King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba indulged in the acquisition of goods on a biblical scale. But it is only at the end of the twentieth century that exchanging money for goods has been included within the repertoire of an artist's creative endeavors. Haim Steinbach is one of a number of artists who equate art-making with shopping. The objects he purchases and then displays are his works of art. Often, the shelves on which they are placed are the only components of his work that are newly fabricated.

Shelf with Annie Figurine, 1981
Wood, plastic masks, contact paper,
and plaster figurine, 25 x 22 x 14 in.
Courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art and Sonnabend
Gallery, New York



shopping

Haim Steinbach

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Born 1944, Rechevot, Israel
Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York: BFA
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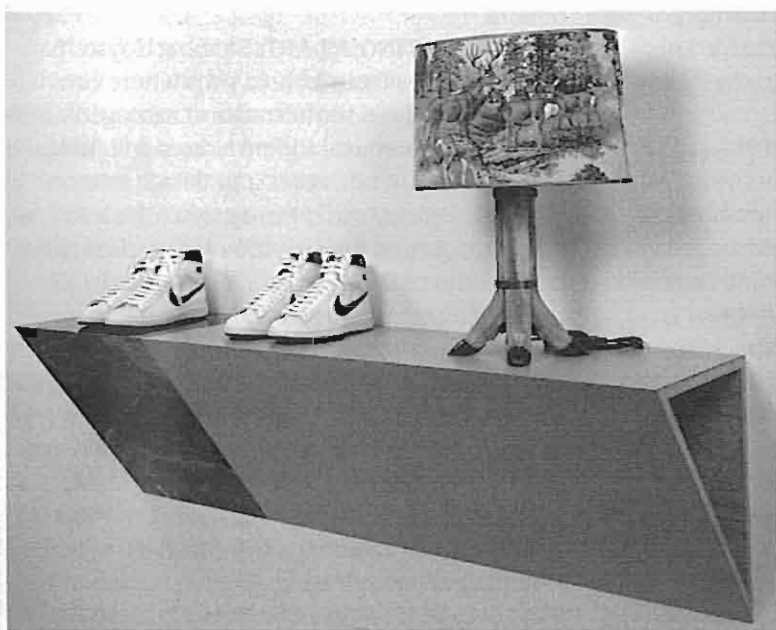
Bumper sticker: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping"

T-shirts: "The difference between men and boys is the price of their toys"; "Shop-a-holic"; "He who dies with the most toys wins"

Greeting cards: "Work to live, live to love, love to shop"; "Born to shop"; "I shop, therefore I am"

Apron: "A woman's place is in the mall"

Coffee mug: "Mall rats"



Merchandisers and advertising executives are often accused of preying upon an unsuspecting public, conjuring schemes to unleash bouts of impulse-buying. But this impression is contradicted by the mottoes emblazoned on the goods listed above. Such items are purchased by thousands of individuals who identify with their slogans. These objects brandish the fun and fulfillment offered by participating in the climax of the marketing process—the moment of sale. Their owners have pledged allegiance to a lifestyle of consumption.

Haim Steinbach partakes of the merchandising doctrines

that rule most contemporary lives. He roams the streets and the commercial strips searching for things to buy, instead of isolating himself in his studio. Then he arranges his purchases on shelves he constructs, instead of painting, carving, or casting. Thus his work consists of displays of merchandise available to anyone able to pay the price.

HAIM STEINBACH
charm of tradition, 1985
Mixed media construction, 38 x 66 x 13 in.

Courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art and Sonnabend
Gallery, New York

Steinbach's creative process reflects prevailing social values as intrinsically as the methods employed by Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, and Charles Willson Peale conveyed the values upon which this country was founded. The labor-intensive paintings created by these eighteenth-century artists proclaimed an ethic based on hard work, temperance, and discipline. Steinbach's adoption of shopping as art is equally valid because it announces the unapologetic pursuit of consumption, extravagance, and indulgence that is characteristic of these final decades of the twentieth century.

Just as artists in previous generations honed their skills in carving, casting, and painting, Steinbach develops his skills in buying. This endeavor draws attention to the new kind of proficiency that determines survival. Well-being no longer requires tools and dexterity; it is a function of culling the marketplace for the best item at the lowest price. Similarly, social status depends more on spending power than on beauty, talent, intelligence, or spirituality. Shopping is a serious endeavor. Steinbach has designated it an artistic one as well.

But shopping is more than a functional affair. Even window-shopping is a leisure-time activity, and shopping sprees are common antidotes to frustration and depression. Infomercials are a form of entertainment. Going to a mall cheers people up. It also cheers the country up. It is shopping, not parades or festivals, that comprises our culture's primary mode of celebration. Price-slashing sales define the manner in which we commemorate Veteran's Day, President's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Martin Luther King Day. We honor our nation's heritage by spending money.

If art provides material evidence of the artist's keenest perceptions and finest sensibilities, Steinbach suggests that purchased commodities fulfill this role for him. This seemingly curious assertion is confirmed by the observation that shoppers behave like artists. Market choices manifest their tastes and desires. Shopping thereby bestows meaning on life and grants the psychological rewards that once resulted from producing things.

Furthermore, buying is empowering. Each decision involves exertion, suspense, self-asser-

tion, and creative problem-solving. Like art, shopping provides the means for achieving self-expression and aesthetic pleasure. Steinbach thus argues that *"Objects, commodity products, or art works have functions for us that are not unlike words, language. We invented them for our own use and we communicate through them, thereby getting into self-realization."*¹

Steinbach seems to revel in the regenerative thrill-seeking of being an avid consumer. Like sex and eating, it is never wholly fulfilled. No product is too paltry to consecrate his delight in material plenty. Greed, squandering, crassness, infantile demands for gratification, all of these derogatory terms are expunged from his definition of the verb "to consume." In his work, the purchasing of objects offers visual exultation and pride in having disposable income. He methodically explores the components of consumption, which he identifies as *"the commonly shared social ritual[s] of collecting, arranging, and presenting objects."*²

COLLECTING AS ART: Steinbach systematically examines the manifold sites where consumer desires are stimulated and assuaged: thrift shops and boutiques, supermarkets and furniture stores, museum gift stores and design emporiums, J.C. Penney's and Nordstrom's. He even goes prospecting through the bins of disorderly, cut-rate merchandise that line the aisles in Job Lot Trading establishments. Other explorations take place amid the make-believe tropics in Banana Republics. All marketed goods are candidates for inclusion in his assemblages. He is as likely to return with a rare antique as a mass-produced utensil.

Unlike a wife or husband conducting the weekly chores, Steinbach sustains the delight of a tourist encountering the glittering sights of a great bazaar. He avidly searches for souvenirs of his journeys, perpetually eager to reenact the rite of impulse-buying. His works are not preconceived. Each purchase is the result of a chance encounter with an object that leaps from the congestion of the merchandising arena. Exhibitions of Steinbach's work abroad are initiated when he goes shopping on location. Thus each is a tangible record of goods available in the immediate locale. Museumgoers see their own lives reflected in his efforts.

In the late 1970s, before his work began to command high prices, Steinbach confined his purchases to cheap objects found in flea markets, yard sales, and secondhand shops. When the price of his work escalated, so did the value of its ingredients. Pieces made between 1979 and 1983 included a child's plastic ball, a T-shirt, a copy of a Precolombian sculpture, Ajax cleanser, a cereal box, a plastic clock, a stuffed raccoon, and a Frisbee. In 1985 he combined BOLD detergent boxes with new enamel teapots, and a year later he introduced wooden owls carved by a professional artisan. By 1987 Steinbach was purchasing authentic eighteenth-century Dutch carved figures and Universal weight-lifting machines. In 1988 he acquired a rare French walnut armoire and a Mies Van der Rohe chaise. In 1989 he bought museum-quality ancient Israeli pottery; and in 1990 a work included an original sculpture by the well-known artist, Pol Bury.

Although set prices are determined according to overall size, the buyer additionally absorbs the cost of the objects incorporated into the work. Occasionally, objects are sold by themselves: in these cases, Steinbach charges only the price he paid. Once the objects have been assigned places on the shelves that become their sculptural support, however, they are considered artworks and command the hefty price of fine art. This pricing structure demonstrates the importance Steinbach attaches to display. Objects are granted the privileged status of art only after they become elements in his assemblages.

ARRANGING PURCHASED OBJECTS: Steinbach differentiates between two phases of the ritual of commerce. This ritual is initiated when merchandise is presented on the counters and display cases of stores. These point-of-purchase displays are often designed by professionals who are trained in the techniques of high-powered marketing. The second stage begins when the objects leave the turbulent domain of the marketplace and enter the private sphere of a home or workplace. Once the objects are purchased, personalized relationships are established between them and their owners. Steinbach comments that many commodities are purchased by people simply "to build their own

cathedral inside their house. They select the objects that they like to live with, and they make a shell for themselves. They cultivate their little domain."³

Having made his purchases, Steinbach neither manipulates nor transforms them in any way. "What I do with objects is what anyone can do, what anyone does anyway with objects, which is talk and communicate through a socially shared ritual of moving, placing and arranging them."⁴ The formula of acquisition ordinarily

"All commodities are made with the intention of eliciting desire . . . We live in a culture of 'pornography,' we are engulfed by it, contained in it."

ends when items are given a place on their owner's turf. But Steinbach returns them to the commercial sector in the form of art. In this context these purchased commodities relinquish their intended use and assume a new role within the artist's assemblage. Steinbach states that they become "disenfranchised of personalized, ritualized and qualitative associations which may have been attributed to them at another time."⁵

When an artist configures utensils, antiques, animal specimens, and prosthetic devices, their meaning is recalibrated. A new order is devised. They become art. Thus recently purchased objects are reinstalled in an art gallery to be repurchased by art collectors. "Everyday objects produced by our society may be turned into objects of desire more than one time. I am trying to demonstrate that an object may be consumed more than one time and desired in more than one way."⁶

His collectors assign them a place amid their artworks, furnishings, and personal mementos. Steinbach describes the irony of this process: "I make an arrangement of shelf and objects which (is) a fragment of my collection from my living room and send it off to someone else's living room (or bedroom, kitchen, hallway). Once reinstalled, my arrangement of objects will face my host's arrangement of objects, putting the issues of choice in focus."⁷

Steinbach's art often asserts a paradoxical presence in collectors' typically refined and sophisticated homes. Pieces that include BOLD detergent, AJAX cleanser, and Corn Flakes grant

objects normally hidden in broom closets and kitchen cabinets the privileges of public display. In the process, they shed their association with laundries, sinks, and cereal bowls and become sources of aesthetic and symbolic contemplation.

The commodities themselves are exalted by the sheer force of Steinbach's scrutiny. Like a poet choosing and then combining simple words until they are resonant with new meaning, he meticulously contrives the combinations and



HAIM STEINBACH
Spirit I, 1987
Mixed media construction, 83 x 96 x 91 in.
(gym set), 49 1/4 x 170 7/8 x 27 1/2 in. (shelf)

Courtesy the artist and
Sonnabend Gallery,
New York.

Photo: Lawrence Bech

positions of his visual units and presents them in the new syntax of his tableaux. Relocated in this manner, their latent formal qualities and thematic content are released.

Mythology: *charm of tradition* (1985) consists of two pairs of Nike sneakers and a lamp. The lamp's base is made of deer legs; its shade depicts a hunting scene. Both sneakers and the deer legs imply fleetness of foot. A race between a human and an animal is further suggested by the reference to Nike, the Greek goddess of victory.

Portrait of a Place: For the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Steinbach displayed locally produced Corn Flakes boxes with pre-Christian jugs that once held cereal grains, reenacting Israel's vast history by pairing current and ancient means of supplying food.

Aesthetic Abstraction: *Supremely Black* (1985) is a stunning assemblage of two wedge-shaped shelves, one solid red, the other tar

black. The red shelf holds two black pitchers. The black shelf holds three BOLD Detergent boxes whose red background and black letters contribute to the dazzling optical scheme. *Supremely Black* reinterprets a great monument of Russian Suprematist art for the 1980s.

Social Commentary: *Spirit I* (1987) pairs two immense steel weight-lifting machines and a set of lava lamps. The passivity of the 1960s drug culture becomes the counterpoint for the fitness prized in the 1980s.

Social Narrative: A shelf of 1981-83 displays a Little Orphan Annie figurine and inverted Halloween Spiderman masks. Like a visual fairy tale, the work recreates the common scenario of the hostile male confronting the innocent female.

THE POLITICS OF DISPLAY: The shelf—the prototypical emblem of aggressive marketing and conspicuous consumption—is central to Steinbach's scrupulous analysis of the role of commodities in contemporary society. The popularity of shelves as facilitators of display has risen and fallen with the fate of the middle class. It is reported that they first appeared in the eighteenth century to flaunt the wealth of the bourgeoisie.⁸ They fell out of vogue during the French Revolution when material ostentation contradicted the populist ideals of the times. They reappeared during the Restoration and have proliferated ever since, infiltrating both the public sphere, where they announce an object's availability for sale, and the domestic sphere, where they manifest the taste and affluence of their owners. In both contexts, shelves confer special status on objects.

In Steinbach's work, the design of shelves is as diverse as the kinds of objects arrayed upon them. He exploits the shelf's varied formal and associative meanings by fashioning special supports for his purchased objects. His first shelves were standard lumber planks hung with common hardware metal brackets. Around 1982 he began to construct handmade shelves out of eccentric assortments of discarded home-decorating materials, fragments from nature, scraps of lumber, furniture parts, plastics, and junk. In 1985 he converted to geometric, wedge-shaped shelves made of plastic laminate over wood.

The shelf swells to new proportions in *Untitled* (French walnut armoire, Cuban mahogany

armoires) (1988). This work consists of two similar armoires placed back-to-back and framed by a larger cabinet. An armoire is a piece of furniture in which collections of objects are stored. Large enough to provide tangible signs of wealth, they were favored by the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century. By framing these two armoires, Steinbach isolates them from their domestic function and presents them as metaphors for crass materialism.

Steinbach first became aware of the way in which shelves announce lifestyles when he was growing up in Tel Aviv. There, he says, *"you have all these Jews who were coming in from Europe and different countries, speaking different languages and having different cultural backgrounds. As a child I was really fascinated by the dramatic difference between the cultural milieu of one household and another. . . . My father was a kind of pioneer of a 'modern' look in our neighborhood—Scandinavian-style furniture and so on. I remember the first time I went from my modern house to visit a friend whose house was all chintzrococo and heavy glass. . . . In a sense my work is precisely about those distinctions between one household and the next."*¹⁰ His initial reaction was to avoid displaying or even acquiring objects for his own home. *"I realized that I had developed an incredible bias toward objects, probably as a result of a resistance to an ideology of 'commodity fetishism.'"*¹¹ Ultimately, however, Steinbach abandoned himself to objects with the fervor of an unabated shopping spree. *"One day I decided to open up, to fill my house with objects and let myself experience and familiarize myself with them again."*¹² In this manner, he evolved his tripartite operation to articulate the relationship between the commodity-glutted environment and our collective ideals and yearnings.

Detractors accuse Steinbach of complicity in the mindless frenzy of consumption. They insist that elevating shopping to an art form dignifies excessive consumption of wasteful products. Arguing that art's influence would be better used to reduce the congestion of the marketplace and relieve the pressure on garbage dumps, they reprove him for reinforcing an addiction that, like junk food, nourishes neither our bodies nor our souls. Defenders assert that Steinbach ingeniously manifests the shift in industrialized soci-

eties from fashioning to purchasing and the yuppie's delight in commodity acquisition.

The artist himself uses the word "pornography" to describe the enticement and procurement of objects in the marketplace. *"Pornography is seductive, it is comprised of formal elements designed, manipulated and registered to attain high states of stimulation. All commodities are made with the intention of eliciting desire. . . . We live in a culture of 'pornography,' we are engulfed by it, contained in it."*¹³ Steinbach's immersion, however, corresponds more to a warden than a prostitute. He describes his mission by asserting, *"If this state of things is 'pornographic' we must look at it and ask ourselves how we partake in it."*¹⁴ Since we are unavoidably entangled in the promotion, procurement, and consumption of objects, viewing a Haim Steinbach assemblage provides an occasion to scrutinize the manner in which objects govern our lives.

STEINBACH POSTSCRIPT:

Foraging, once the means of survival for our earliest ancestors, has been revived by many of today's most vanguard artists. Their hunting and gathering excursions take them into common sites of procurement, but uncommon sites of artistic activity. The material they collect often serves as their medium, their product, and their subject matter. Haim Steinbach scavenges in stores, Wolfgang Laib in fields, David Hammons in ghetto streets, Amalia Mesa-Bains in trinket and memento shops, Mike Kelley in thrift shops, Sherrie Levine in art books, Barbara Kruger in old magazines, Christian Boltanski in rummage bins, Tomie Arai in media depictions of Asians.